

Some Unfinished Business

Originally written in English

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Pažaislis Monastery Asylum Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania, 1959

Martin Gingerly set his knapsack on the stone floor and winced at the clinking it made despite his care. He listened for a moment, but there was no other sound or movement in the gloom of the church. He looked up.

High in the cupola's frescoes, the Virgin Mary was being crowned and an orchestra of angels played lutes, harps, and cymbals. Other angels, from seraphim to cherubim, spilled across the heavens and the many martyrs displayed their wounds. But the light was poor and the heavens were very far above. It was hard to make out finer details.

This milling crowd of saints and sinners peering down from the frescoes in the dome of the church tended to frighten any patients who appeared below. Even a healthy mind might have trouble with this kind of divine display and scrutiny. If the uneasy souls below had demons in them, those devils became uneasy and began to squirm, precipitating tremors in some and shrieks of fear and rage in others.

Even simple depressives and neurotics could not resist looking and suffering the kind of moral vertigo an inexperienced alpinist suffered by looking down. As a result, none of the troubled internees could be allowed into the old baroque church of the former monastery. Far better to close that door and use the old church only for storage.

In any case, these days the heavenly hosts didn't pay much attention to what went on below. Those on the ground had to settle their own affairs now, to determine what was a sin and what was not, and to apportion reward or punishment on a scale with variable weights.

Martin had stumbled into the place while searching for a certain patient. Obviously, he wasn't in here. The rest of the former monastery complex was a useful sanatorium for its dozens of cells among several wings. The massive wooden doors and high walls contained the troubled and murmuring invalids, each assigned to a particular wing for those with a particular affliction.

Martin stood in the dim light of the church and surveyed the storage boxes, old beds, broken chairs, and stacks of manila folders bulging with histories of psychosis and tied up with black ribbons. Outside, it was a spring evening, and up at this northern latitude it would still be light for very long. Not inside the church, though. Here came only cycles of perpetual dusk followed by darkness.

Martin wore sturdy working men's clothes and a short-billed cap on his head because he had lost his hair in a fever in the gulag. He was only twenty-six. Some of the

years had been difficult and made him look older, but he had borne a great deal and come out stronger for it. Others had broken, but he refused to break.

The Pažaislis Monastery was a convent no more, its nuns evicted and scattered in 1948. The Soviets went about their activities: closing the monasteries, confiscating the farms, taking away the businesses and shipping off streams of men, women, and children in a river of humanity to the far reaches of the massive prison state. The Komi Republic, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, and other locations were very far away from the newly-annexed, formerly independent state of Lithuania.

Now Pažaislis was a crumbling asylum near Kaunas, a place where the mentally unstable were kept in the cells of former nuns who were making their precarious way as unmarried women in the Soviet world. Where once there was prayer, now there was madness. The grounds were walled to contain it, albeit imperfectly, and the madness pooled here and there and bled out everywhere, and after a while, it didn't even feel like madness any longer, just the way of life in this country.

Such an unhappy place in such an unlucky country! First came the Soviets in 1940, arresting and deporting and leaving a trail of murdered bodies as they fled before the Nazis in 1941. Then came the many tens of thousands of deaths, mostly of Jews, killed by the Germans and their local collaborators. In 1944, the Soviets returned. Those who could, those with a little education, fled west. Those caught behind had to adapt or resist. Resisters were doomed to die eventually, but those who chose to adapt were sometimes lucky. Many times not.

The asylum was not all that far from Vilnius, but it had taken Martin a day of hitchhiking rides and then walking out to the countryside near Kaunas under light rain. He was wet, but as a former farm boy and prisoner was not greatly inconvenienced by a little bad weather. His backpack was heavy and its contents were fragile, but he had once returned across all of Russia with more weight than this.

It had not been easy to find the man he was looking for, but the gentle library director back in Vilnius seemed to know just about everything there was to know about everyone in the small country.

"No one likes to talk about Kostas much," said Director Stonkus, studying the spine of a Polish volume bound in leather. Many subjects were too risky to talk about. Silence was safest. The Lithuanians even had a saying, about the virtues of silence. *Tyla gera byla* – silence is the best defence. Maybe the idea was never to be noticed at all, to behave like a mouse and to lose the squeak.

It was a sign of the director's regard for Martin that he spoke at all about the private life of the esteemed Kostas.

"His drinking was completely out of hand. You saw him here that day when you were married, but that was nothing compared to what came later. He couldn't go out to children's events any more. He sat at the bar in the commissary in the basement of the Writers' Union all day long. Even his wife couldn't lure him home. His skin turned yellow. I expected his liver to explode at any moment. It still might, with what he put it through. And worst of all, he started to talk all sorts of nonsense after he'd been drinking for a while."

Director Stonkus stopped there like a man who decided he had said too much. Like Kostas, he had violated the rule of silence and now seemed to regret it. One must never

talk too much in the Soviet Union, unless on certain subjects. Stonkus opened the book and began to read it silently, but Martin could not let it go at that.

“So Kostas is still down there at the Writers’ Union Bar?”

Stonkus looked up at him, exasperated. “Mr. Kostas is recovering in a rest home near Kaunas and I am sure the whole nation wishes him quick recovery from his illness so he can return to his valuable work.”

Pažaislis was not an ordinary drunk tank. A man of Kostas’s stature received the best treatment, and the Pažaislis rehabilitation facility was intended for party members. But even the best rehab centre in the Soviet Union had only a mouldering former nun’s cell where the man was locked in a room between injections and cleanings in order to shout, tremble, and weep his way through his withdrawal.

The asylum was imperfectly restricted territory. There were walls, but they were in poor repair and easily breached in several places. There was a doorman at the front gate, but he went for walks and napped right in his chair. It took a while for Martin to get his bearings once he was inside.

The night shift orderlies in the lunchroom didn’t care who Martin was. They told him the cell doors were locked for the night. These men were thuggish but corruptible, and one bottle of vodka was all it took to find out where Kostas was and that the windows on the ground floor of his wing were barred with hinges and clasps on the outside. After all, no one expected anyone to break *into* one of those rooms.

“Lights out” was more an aspiration than a reality in this northern climate, where the summer sky was barely willing to darken at ten in the evening. Only a skeleton crew stayed behind for the evening and night, and part of that crew could be counted upon to be sitting at the night station with a bottle of vodka. Given Martin’s donation, they now had a second one, and besides, it was Saturday night and no important administrators would be showing up the next morning. The orderlies saw no relationship between their own drinking and that of the recovering alcoholics in their cells.

The evening was still bright, but it didn’t really matter because there were no guards patrolling the property. Martin made his way through the yard past broken farm machinery unused for a very long time, a rusted-out Studebaker truck, one of the many given to the Soviets by the Americans during the war.

He made his way across the unkempt yard and peered through the window into the cell. The walls had not been painted in a long time and what paint there was came flaking off. Kostas lay on his narrow cot with his eyes closed. He twitched like someone in a dream remembering a blow or an insult. Martin smeared a little grease to loosen the pin that held the bars shut and a little more on the hinges. The metal still squeaked as he opened the bars. He pushed open the window, set his heavy bag inside, and then climbed in.

Kostas had turned on his side, and his eyes were open as he watched Martin reach back outside to pull the bars shut. Kostas’s greying hair had been cut short in the hospital, but the widow’s peak was still there. His skin was a ghastly shade of yellow that showed the damage to his liver, and his eyes were watery. He wore a stained, grey smock over underclothes.

“Close the window too,” said Kostas. “The place is drafty.”

The room contained a chair and a small table with a pitcher of water on it and a glass. There were two buckets at the end of the bed, but thankfully, these were both empty.

“You don’t seem surprised to see me,” said Martin. “Do you know who I am?”

“I have no idea.”

“But I remember you all too well,” said Martin.